

Forty-four years ago, President John Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act and called it the first step in addressing “the unconscionable practice of paying female employees less wages than male employees for the same job.” At that time, women earned 59 cents for each dollar earned by a man.

Over the last four decades, we have made significant strides in closing the wage gap between women and men, but there is still more work to be done. Working women now earn about 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. Here in Maryland, women do slightly better than the national average, earning about 81 cents for every dollar earned by men.

In addition to closing the pay gap, women have come a long way to dispel to dispel gender stereotypes, surpass expectations, and push through the glass ceiling. According to the Center for Women’s Business Research, as of 2006 there are over 197,000 privately-held women-owned firms in Maryland, accounting for more than 47 percent of all privately-held firms in the state.

Still, it takes the average woman 16 months to earn what men earn in one calendar year – an inequity that not only hurts women, but hurts families. Women often provide a significant share of their family’s income, and in many cases, are the sole wage-earner. Studies show that working families lose a staggering \$200 billion of income annually to the wage gap—an average loss of more than \$4,000 each for working women’s families every year because of unequal pay, even after accounting for differences in education, age, location and hours worked.

Unfortunately, the equal pay movement was dealt a serious blow earlier this month when the United States Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to dismiss a pay discrimination suit by Lilly Ledbetter, a longtime Goodyear supervisor, who was paid thousands of dollars a year less than her male counterparts. The Court instead opted to uphold an appeals court decision which ruled an employee must file a claim within six months from the day their pay was set - a ruling which essentially denies victims any chance of proving their case given the difficulty of determining pay discrimination within such a short period.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who authored the Court's dissenting opinion, wrote, "In our view, the court does not comprehend, or is indifferent to, the insidious way in which women can be victims of pay discrimination...Pay disparities often occur, as they did in Ledbetter's case, in small increments; only over time is there strong cause to suspect that discrimination is at work."

Justice Ginsberg also appealed to the powers of Congress to rectify this injustice and counteract the majority ruling. The House is currently looking at ways to do just that, starting with a hearing next week in the

Education & Labor Committee on the implications of the Ledbetter case.

If we are ever going to close the pay gap between women and men, justice for victims of gender-based pay discrimination can not and must not be denied. The courts are important vehicles to hold employers accountable in following the letter and the spirit of the Equal Pay Act.

Acknowledging the historical significance of the anniversary of this important legislation reaffirms our commitment to continue the fight for gender equality in every arena. Working women in Maryland are farther along the road to equal pay than women in many states; however each of us must still work toward achieving the very important and realistic goals of the Equal Pay Act.

Action is required on the part of business owners and executives to advance corporate compensation practices with equal benefits. Action is also required

from policymakers to strengthen equal pay laws and improve their enforcement. Finally, if our nation is to achieve the goals set back in 1963, it requires action from the American people, refusing to allow obstacles or ignorance to impede the success of women in the work force.